DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 002 EA 032 337

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TITLE	Virtual Schools. Trends and Issues.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	6p.; In: School Choice. Trends and Issues; see EA 032 330.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. Tel: 541-346-2332; Tel: 800-438-8841 (Toll Free); Fax: 541-346-2334; Web site: http://eric.uoregon.edu. For full text: http://eric.uoregon.edu/trends_issues/choice/virtual_schools.html.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Administration; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Internet; Nontraditional Education; Online Systems; *School Choice

ABSTRACT

This article looks at a rapidly growing form of distance education: virtual schools. Also known as cyber schools, these Internet-based programs enroll fewer than 50,000 students nationwide, but more and more companies are entering this market. Some examples of these virtual schools are the Willoway CyberSchool, which was founded by a former elementary-school teacher; K 12 Inc., established by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett; VHS Inc., a virtual high school that was developed with federal funding; Florida Virtual School, the nation's largest virtual school, offering free courses to any student in grades 9-12 in the state; the Internet Academy in Washington State, which fills gaps in homeschooled students' instruction; the Kentucky Virtual High School, which offers advanced, specialized, and foreign-language courses free to public students; and the Colorado Online School Consortium, which was founded to provide advanced-placement courses to students attending rural and small schools and homeschoolers. The increasing number of virtual schools has raised concern with education planners since most school districts receive funding based on student enrollment. States are having to revisit their school-finance laws as virtual schools compete for state dollars. Many believe a set number of virtual courses can benefit a student but decry full reliance on computers, believing that parent-child interaction is the essence of homeschooling. (RJM)

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ED 473 002

Trends and Issues

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EA032337

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Virtual Schools

By Margaret Hadderman

A rapidly growing form of distance education, virtual schools, also known as cyber schools, offer parents and students a wide spectrum of online curricula. Parents, particularly full-time workers, are increasingly relying on online curricula to supplement or even supplant homeschool offerings (Zehr 2000).

The Wall Street Journal reports that virtual schools enroll fewer than 50,000 students nationwide, a small fraction of the 53 million students in U.S. K-12 education systems (Tomsho 2002). "But that is changing," says the journal, "as companies pitch online education as a way for school districts to stretch resources and maybe even make money" (Tomsho 2002). Although for-profit companies play an important role in the development of virtual schools, many of the most successful such schools are operated by states, school districts, and individual public schools.

A survey of virtual schools by WestEd's Distance Learning Resource Network (Tom Clark 2001) confirms that the "movement can be considered the 'next wave' in technology based K-12 education, joining proven distance learning delivery methods." The survey of forty-four virtual schools points to a trend toward offering all grade levels, whereas the first virtual schools were mostly high schools. Extrapolating from the survey, WestEd estimates that "40,000 to 50,000 K-12 students will enroll in an online course in 2001-2002" (Clark).

Virtual schools are sanctioned to operate in fourteen states as the states' "own" K-12 virtual schools, according to WestEd. Among other types of virtual schools, some are based at universities, several are run by consortia (a few of these draw students from across the nation), many serve particular school districts, some operate as charter schools, and some are offered by private organizations. Forty-three percent of the surveyed schools began in 2000 or 2001 (Tom Clark 2001).

Some proponents attribute the growing popularity of online curricula to parents' concerns about school safety, following the Columbine shootings and other violent incidents. Others see online courses as a godsend for students with special learning needs or behavioral problems who do not perform well in classroom settings.

Virtual schools that receive public funding give homeschooling families a financial incentive to enroll. In states such as Pennsylvania, where virtual schools can be set up as charter schools and qualify to receive the funding that normally goes to the students' home school districts, virtual schools can afford to provide for each student free course materials and even a free computer.

Examples of Virtual Schools

Willoway CyberSchool. For $2,250 yearly, adolescent homeschoolers anywhere in North America can be taught by Willoway CyberSchool, an online private school founded by a former elementary-school teacher based in Rheinholds, Pennsylvania. A student "typically receives assignments over the Internet, researches them on World Wide Web sites, and then turns in a document in HTML, the Web coding language, to his

teachers showing what he's learned" (Zehr 1999). Videoconferencing with teachers, hands-on experiments, and service projects outside the home help combat the loneliness factor.

K 12 Inc. Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett recently launched K 12 Inc., his "classical" cyber-learning program for kindergarten through second grade (Trotter, October 17, 2001). So far, "the company has enrolled several thousand students, a majority of whom are homeschoolers in 46 states." A few hundred students are using the program at three chartered online schools in Colorado, Pennsylvania, Texas, California, and Alaska.

Homeschoolers enrolled directly in K 12 pay about "$100 per half-year course, or $1,000 for an entire school year's program, which they access on the company's web site" (Trotter, October 17, 2001). Resources consist of learning activities, daily assessments, planning tools, and instructional guidelines for parents, supplemented by shipments of books, tambourines, music CDs, and videotapes. Several national groups, including the American Federation of Teachers, are resisting the company's efforts to sign up massive numbers of public-school students, decrying K 12's reliance on parents rather than teachers to supervise learning (Trotter, October 17, 2001).

VHS, Inc. (formerly known as the Concord Virtual High School). More than 100 schools across the country participate in this virtual high school, which was developed with federal funding (a five-year Technology Innovation Challenge grant ended in October 2001) and is now funded by the membership fees of its cooperating schools (Tom Clark 2001). The leading model of a consortium, VHS, Inc. in 2000-2001 offered 155 courses—both core and elective—taught by teachers in its member schools. For a $6,000 annual fee, a school can sponsor a NetCourse taught by one of the school's teachers and in return enroll twenty of its students in any of VHS, Inc.'s other courses in both fall and spring semesters. Teachers learn how to teach online through a twenty-six week online NetCourse (Tom Clark 2001).

Florida Virtual School, the nation's largest virtual school, offers free courses to any student in grades 9-12 in the state. This state-funded school, which specializes in advanced coursework taught by certified teachers, serves students in public and private schools, charter schools, and those being schooled at home. Responding to superintendents' requests, Florida Virtual School has made a special effort to offer Advanced Placement courses. Enrollment rose from about 2,800 in 1999-2000 to 5,900 in 2000-2001, according to WestEd (Tom Clark 2001).

The Internet Academy, based in Federal Way, Washington, receives state aid to fill gaps in homeschooled students' instruction.

The Kentucky Virtual High School offers advanced, specialized, and foreign-language courses free to public-schoo! students, but charges homeschoolers (and others) $300 per course.

The Colorado Online School Consortium, operating out of Creed, was founded to provide advanced-placement courses to students attending rural and small schools and homeschoolers (Vail 2001).

Growing Financial Controversy

Because of the large sums of money (in some states) that follow students who

enroll in virtual schools, the movement is rapidly becoming a hot issue in school finance. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that some public school districts have launched virtual schools "specifically to attract students—and the public money that pays for their educations—from beyond their own boundaries." For example, "the tiny Vilas School District in rural Colorado boosted its revenue 75% this year, to $1.4 million, thanks to a new online school that increased its student count to 170, up from 95 a year ago" (Tomsho 2002).

Several school districts in California "have used cyber schools to raid each other for students," states *The Wall Street Journal* (Tomsho 2002).

When set up as charter schools, virtual schools in Pennsylvania are entitled to the state aid that the students' home districts had been receiving. The financial ramifications of this state law are the source of a growing controversy among the state's school districts (Tomsho 2002).

Taking advantage of Pennsylvania's charter-school law, Morrisville Borough School District, northeast of Philadelphia, contracted with a startup virtual school, the Einstein Academy, which enrolls 2,000 K-12 students from around the state. The academy bills the students' home districts for the full amount of state aid (ranging from $5,000 to $14,000 per student), and in turn pays Morrisville $200 for every student the school enrolls in the district. Having enrolled only 1,100 students within its geographic borders, the district welcomed the revenue from the virtual school as a way to make up for a declining tax base. More than one hundred Pennsylvania school districts are suing Einstein Academy in an attempt to avoid paying the virtual school (Tomsho 2002).

A Few Caveats

Although most observers of the distance-education trend in homeschooling agree that "one or two online courses can be a great benefit to home-schoolers, some decry a reliance on them for a full curriculum" (Zehr 1999). Michael Farris, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, sees parent-child interactions as the essence of homeschooling and believes "online courses should be supplementary and used only in secondary grades" (Zehr 1999).

Tom Layton, the founder of CyberSchool, based in Eugene, Oregon, warns against administering a heavy dose of his own courses to homeschoolers. CyberSchool courses were originally developed and intended for students attending small, rural schools that can't afford advanced-placement courses. According to Layton, online learning exists as a supplement and "should never take the place of flesh-and blood teachers and peers"(Vail 2001).

A University of Virginia education professor deplores the use of virtual classrooms to support homeschooling (Russell 2001). Russell has three objections: Homeschoolers used to high levels of support from teachers/parents might lack adequate help and supervision; the "long-term cumulative effect of an education that forgoes traditional classroom-based socialization in favor of interactive Web sites is unknown"; and large-scale use of computers in virtual schools "might influence our culture in undesirable ways."

Public Opinion

The September 2001 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll (Rose and Gallup) ascertained that the public disapproves, by 67 percent to 30 percent, of allowing students to earn high-school credits over the Internet without attending a regular school. Of the 30 percent who approve of virtual courses, only 49 percent would be willing to have their own child "go through high school taking mostly courses online over the Internet at home instead of attending a regular high school."

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